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Forsyth: Why the madness on Black Friday?

Donelson R. Forsyth | Posted: Thursday, November 28, 2013 12:00 am

Gloucestershire, England, has its annual cheese roll contest, when hundreds of men and women chase a 9-pound round of cheese down a hill so steep that nearly all tumble, fall and crash into one another along the way.

In the fields of Zacatecas, Mexico, families and friends gather in late August to hold a mock battle, La Morisma, to commemorate an ancient battle between Spain's Christian troops and the Turks.

In Paris, about the time of the summer solstice, hundreds of couples dressed all in white set up tables in public parks and dine alfresco by the light of the moon.

And what does the United States have? Black Friday.

On the day after Thanksgiving, shoppers assemble outside malls, big box stores and outlets so they can get a jump on their holiday shopping. And this year, Black Friday is blackening Thursday as many retailers open on Thanksgiving Day to satisfy the impatient masses.

Black Friday's climb from marketing ploy to popular craze resists easy explanation. A day of sleeping late, leftover turkey and trimmings and football seems to easily outgun one spent battling strangers to save a few bucks on this year's cool new toy or gizmo, but last year nearly a quarter of a billion Americans chose the check-out line and not the couch. Why?

Perhaps it's the economics of it all. People are seeking to maximize the value of their spending dollar, and so are seeking high-quality goods priced below market value. Their choice is a rational one: Forgo a bit of holiday relaxation to buy the season's most popular and so most sought-after products. As many Americans continue to struggle financially, Black Friday makes even more sense since the sale offers them their best chance to purchase the most popular products at reduced prices.

But if milling about in a mob risking life and limb for a new Xbox doesn't seem all that rational, how about a more psychological explanation that traces Black Friday back to the quirks of a consumer-oriented mindset? In American society, success is defined not only by the strength of familial bonds



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(celebrated the day before Black Friday), but also one's level of consumption of high-priced goods. By joining in Black Friday's celebration of wanton consumption, people communicate their acceptance of, and relative stature in, a culture that prizes the new over the old and luxury over penury.

Does an anthropological angle offer insights into this Black Friday ritual? Could it be that Black Friday is a modern version of the sharing of communal goods that occurred in earlier times just before the onset of winter? Thanksgiving is a celebration of abundance, where the family commemorates the winter harvest with a massive feast. But it also marks the approach of winter and serves as a warning to lay in the supplies that will be needed during the difficult days ahead. Black Friday then is a modern manifestation of an ancient impulse: Having dramatically depleted our reserves, we feel compelled to rush out and get some more.

Or, maybe it's a form of entertainment. Black Friday transforms the mall into a consumer's amusement park: Both are expensive, require waiting in long lines and promote prolonged contact with people you would prefer not to associate with. And many shoppers speak of the excitement of the chase for that elusive bargain, the pleasure they take when planning their shopping excursion and the joy of returning home having bagged their quarry. Yet when social scientists take up observation posts in the parking lots outside the doors of stores early in the morning of Black Friday, the people they study don't seem happy, jubilant or excited. Anxiety, irritability, frustration and aggravation are plentiful, but not too much boisterous exuberance. Each year the stories of overcrowding, long lines, short tempers and even stampedes and injuries cast considerable doubt on the "it's so much fun" hypothesis.

So, perhaps Black Friday is just one of those mysteries of social life. Humans are the most unpredictable species on the planet, for just when we think we know how they will act, think and feel, they instead head off in a direction that is entirely without precedent.

We can say with confidence that most people — most of the time — flee far from the madding crowd. Except on the day after Thanksgiving. Then they hasten to join it. Go figure.

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